DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 078 PS 018 359

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TITLE Planning Block Play Experiences for Young Children.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Kansas City, MO, April 27-30, 1989).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; Early Childhood Education; Guidelines; *Play; *Teacher Role; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Blocks

ABSTRACT

Playing with blocks can facilitate the creative, social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of young children. This article presents information and activities concerning block play and its role in young children's experience. Topics covered include: (1) types of blocks; (2) selection of blocks and accessories; (3) planning of the environment and activities for encouraging creativity and development. It is fundamental that the block area be well-planned and blocks and accessories be well-selected. It should be recognized that the teacher or caregiver has an important role in establishing reasonable rules and encouraging block play. (RH)

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Planning Block Play Experiences for Young Children

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Running head: Block Play

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Abstract

Block Play experience can provide opportunities for creative, social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. This article presents information and activities concerning block play, and its role in experience for youong children. The block area should be well planned and blocks and accessories should be well selected to enhance block play. The teacher or care giver has an important role to establish reasonable rules and encourage block play. Topics covered include the following: types of blocks, selection of blocks and accessories, planning the environment and specific activities to encourage creativity, social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.

Planning Block Play Experiences for Young Children

Blocks are a basic play material for young children and are available in a variety of sizes, shapes and textures. Block play experiences provide opportunities for enjoyment, planning, communication, thinking and problem solving to the young child. Block play experiences assist in understanding more about number, size, and shape and language skills develop through sharing ideas. Affective skills develop as children work together, and motor skills are enhanced as children manipulate the the different sizes of blocks

The purpose of block play experience is to provide opportunities for artistic, creative, social, emotional, physical and cognitive development through an appropriate medium for young children.

Through block play the child can:

-enhance large muscle development by lifting and carrying materials

-develop coordination skills

-select size and shapes

-think and reason

-solve problems

-make decisions

-develop creativity

-enjoy constructing things

-work with others

-work independently

-use own ideas

-increase attention span

-discover ways to use materials

-develop responsibility

-learn to place and organize materials

According to Piaget (1962) the capacity to let an object represent another object is symbolic play. This is regarded as the basis for imagination and learning. Block play experiences provide a medium for symbolic play.

The first comprehensive study of block building experiences was made in the 1920's by Harriet Johnson (Cohen and Rudoph, 1977). Johnson (1962) noted that children progress in stages of block building. The very young child carries the block around and does not use it for building. Building begins to occur around age two or three, and patterns begin to appear around the age of four. Children five years of age and older begin to symbolize structure (Johnson, 1962).

Types of Blocks

Blocks and block play experiences can be an exciting and popular instructional medium for young children. Teachers and care givers provide opportunties for children to select from a variety of blocks. Provenzo and Brett (1983) point out that there is a tremendous variety of blocks. A variety of blocks can stimulate imagination, creativity, and cognition.

Wooden blocks provide a medium for construction and play. Spodek, Saracho, and Davis (1987) state that the two major types of wooden blocks for preschool children are large hollow blocks and the smaller solid wooden unit blocks.

Hollow Blocks

Hollow wooden blocks are usually based on a unit of about one foot square by one-half foot deep, and they are also available in half units and double units, as well as triangular ramps and boards. Some hollow blocks are made of hard wood with two open sides that allow ease in carrying them. Others are made of plywood and closed on all sides(Spodek, Saracho, Davis, 1987).

Hollow blocks are expensive, but they are durable. They provide a permanent contruction material for young children. Hildebrand(1986) recommends a set of sixty large blocks for twenty pre kindergarten children, and a set of seventy-five blocks is recommended for twenty kindergarten children.

Unit Blocks

Unit blocks were designed by Caroline Pratt when she started the City and Country School in New York City. Unit blocks are used in many nursery school and kindergartens of today (Read, Gardner, and Mahler, 1987). Cohen and Rudolph (1977) describe a unit block as twice as wide as it is thick, and twice as long as it is wide. Other blocks are either multiples or divisions of the unit or related to it in width, thickness or length. According to Maxim (1989) unit blocks are durable, their natural wood color is visually appealing, and their smooth finish makes them pleasant to touch. Complete sets of over 750 blocks may be purchased, or half sets or individual pieces.

Other Building Blocks and Materials

In addition to large blocks, there are small blocks available for table activities. There are other block-type construction materials made of wood, plastic or cardboard. Parquetry blocks, Lego sets, Tinker Toys, Lincoln Logs and bristle blocks provide building materials for young children.

Some excellent building materials may be found in the environment. Large packing boxes or milk cartons can be stuffed with news paper to provide construction experiences. Scrap lumber may be cut in various sizes, sanded, painted, and used in construction. Cans, spools, styrofoam and cardboard tubes also produce opportunities for block play experience.

Planning the Environment

A special area in a room for young children should be organized for block play experiences. There should be a space large enough for the number of children who wish to engage in block play. It is important to consider the traffic pattern of the room when arranging the block play area, and a storage area for blocks and accessories should be included in the planning. Hirsch (1984) suggest that the block play area should be visable from other parts of the room to provide opportunities for interaction to develop between the block play area and the other centers in the room.

Selection of Blocks

A variety of blocks should be selected for the block play area. Include both unit and hollow blocks if possible. Include teacher made and other building materials, and provide a variety of accessories to stimulate ideas and creativity.

Consider the following factors when selecting blocks for the block play area:

-number of children

-room size

-building space

-storage

-type of blocks

-accessories

-number of blocks needed

-cost

Building Space

The space for building should be identified. A rug or a space on the floor marked with tape can identify the building space. Indentify a no " building " space directly in front of storage shelves so children can move freely to remove blocks and other items for building. If possible provide enough space for several children to work on different structures simltaneously. It would be rewarding to the children if there could be a space available for the structure to remain for a period of time for display and discussion.

Storage Area

Storage area for blocks and accessories can assit in planning and motivating block play. This area can include permanent or movable shelves or a combination of shelves. Consider the height of young children when selecting shelves. Storage should be large enough to organize blocks of the same size and shape, and blocks and accessories should be with in reach for planning and use.

Remembering left to right eye movement labels for unit blocks should be placed

in the left hand corner of the shelf to assist in organizing and storage of the blocks. Hollow blocks should also have an identified place for storage in the block area. Remember to include defined space for accessories and other building materials Markers and paper for labeling structures and drawing blueprints and patterns should be provided to encourage extended learning experiences. Pictures of buildings and objects can stimulate ideas for block play.

Accessories for the Block Area

Accessories are important in developing block play and stimulating block play. Accessories may be stored on the shelves, in boxes or in plastic tubes. There should be a container for each accessory. Containers may be labeled with a photograph, drawing or a picture from an equipment catalogue. The shelf space for accessories should also be identified.

Accessories for the block area may be purchased or made. The following are suggestions of materials for accessories for the block play:

-Wooden, plastic or rubber people (families or community workers)

-Minature furniture

-Wooden, plastic, or rubber animals

-Wheel toys (large and small cars, trucks, trains, wagons, tractors, boats, airplanes)

-Minature traffic signs

-Pulleys and gears

-Hats

-Puppets

-Books related to building

-Blueprints

-Markers, pencils, cards and paper for labels and stories.

Figures may be made by children and teachers from magazine and catalogue pictures attatched to tissue rolls. Puppets may also be made from paper bags, cups and other items

Other building materials should have a defined space in the block area. These

include dominoes colored cubes, sticks, spools, table blocks, Lego Blocks, Lincoln Logs and wood scraps. These materials can motivate ideas for building.

Planning Block Play Activities

Teacher/care givers plan the block play environment, and provide opportunities for children to participate in the block area. These opportunities encourage artistic and creative development, social and emotional development, and physical and cognitive development. In these experiences concepts and skills develop in mathematics, language, science and social studies.

The block play area should be introduced to the children. Rules should be developed for the area. Guide the children in making rules for building. State the rules in positive terms. The following statements are examples of rules for the block play area:

-Blocks are for building

-Remember the number of children to play in the block area. (numbers may be stated in the rule.)

-Put the blocks and accessories away when block play is completed.

The role of the teacher or care giver is important in the success of block play. Encourage the children by discussing size, texture and shape of the blocks. Ask questions to stimulate interest, thinking, planning, problem solving and building. Encourage children to share ideas through conversation and writing stories.

Block Play Activities

Block play can contribute to the experiences of young children. The following activities can stimulate artistic, creative, social, physical and cognitive development:

-Remove blocks from the shelves and stack them prior to building.

-Plan and write rules for the block play area.

-Sort blocks according to size and shape.

-Have children draw blueprint and then build with blocks.

-Take a field trip to encourage creative building. Look at buildings and other constructions.

-Invite an architect to show children blueprints and explain the occupation.

-Provide pictures to stimulate creative ideas (e.g., buildings and bridges).

-Hats can stimulate role play (e g . firefighter, construction worker).

-Use puppets or let children make puppets at the art center to encourage role play.

-Make accessories by cutting out pictures of people, animals, cars, and other things and glue them to tissue rolls to encourage creative building.

-Make patterns and designs with blocks.

-Read books or poems and encourage children to illustrate ideas.

-Give each child a small number of blocks. Start a project and let each child add a block taking turns until all the blocks are in the structure.

-Work together as partners and in small groups in the block area.

-Identify an area in the room using newsprint or masking tape for each child to have a building place. Place a name card on the space, and on completion of the construction have the child show work and tell about the idea.

-Have a signal for clean-up. Put materials away to music or sing while cleaning up. Example:

Tune: Mulberry Bush
Let us put the blocks away,
Blocks away, blocks away.
Let us put the blocks away,
To use again another day.

-Construct an obstacle course with blocks. Walk, hop or skip around the course.

-Construct a course for cars, trucks or other accessories.

-Move some blocks outside. Larger structures can be developed in an outside space.

-Make blocks from wood scraps. Sand and paint different colors.

-Develop language by writing experience stories.

-Label constructions

-Make traffic signs from poster board or consruction paper and tape on popsicle sticks for construction area.

-Have children draw pictures of their construction and make a book of these drawings.

-Make photographs of construction and place in a scrapbook for the libary or display on the bulletin board.

-On large paper write letters and numbers for children to copy with blocks.

-Cut out letters, numbers or shapes from a plastic table cloth or shower curtain liner for children to outline.

-On a plastic table cloth or shower curtain liner draw designs for children to match.

-Make task cards with outlines of blocks for children to match blocks, build patterns and find blocks that are alike.

-Place a cut out of a block or a block in a box and have the children fill the box with that shape block.

-Cut out shapes of blocks from poster board. On the back of each place a magnetic strip. Children can make designs on the magnetic board and then build designs.

-Make a map using blocks.

-Read stories and have children construct the idea from story.

-Provide a box or basket and have the children fill the container with blocks. Count how many were needed to fill the container.

-Weigh the different blocks.

-Provide several containers and fill with blocks. Compare size and amount.

-Cut out a circle and have the children draw the features. Draw around hands and feet and cut out. Construct a person with the blocks making the body.

Resources

The following materials will provide additional ideas for block play:

Blocks: A Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood. Creative Associates, Inc. Publishers Distributed by Gryphon House, P.O. Box 217, Mount Rainer, Maryland, 298822.

This book places emphasis on learning experiences and the teacher's role in facilitating block play.

The Complete Block Book. Eugene F. Provenzo, and Arlene Brett. Toys 'n Things Press, 906 North Dale Street, Box 23, St Paul, MN, 55103.

This book describes types of blocks and gives ideas for using blocks.

The Block Book. Elizabeth S. Hirch, Editor. National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1834 Connecticut Avenue N.W., Washington, DC 20009.

This book relates information concerning the role of blocks in the curriculum

"Development Through Block Play" by Betty Ruth Baker. Dimensions, vol 17, pp. 4-7, January 1989. Southern Association on Children Under Six , Box 5403 Brady Station, Little Rock, AR 72215.

This article describes ideas to plan the block area and provides activities to encourage block play.

"Play Can Be the Building Blocks of Learning" by Sally Cartwright. Young Children, vol 43, no. 5, p. 44, July 1988. National Association for the Education of Young Children 1834 Connecticut, N.W., Washington, DC 20009-5786. This article describes block play and how it enhances learning. A list of goals for block play and block building is included.

Unit Blocks Fimstrip and Workshop. Child Craft Education Corporation, 20 Kilmer Road, Edison, NJ 08817.

This program demonstrates the role of blocks in the learning environment for young children. Topics include: "What are Unit Blocks? How to Organize, Introduce and Store Unit Blocks, How Children Learn with Unit Blocks, and The Relationship of Unit Blocks to the Curriculum."

Blocks and Accessories

Constructive Playthings
1227 East 119th Street
Grandview, Missouri 64030

Child Craft
20 Kilmer Road
Edison, NJ 08817

Conclusion

Block play provides joy, success, and learning opportunities for the development of young children. Blocks are a basic play material and can be found in many learning environments for young children.

Block play can provide opportunities for thinking, reasoning and problem solving, and enhance physical, social and emotional and creative development. Teachers and care givers should organize the block area, plan experiences, and select a variety of blocks and accessories to stimulate development through block play.

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